

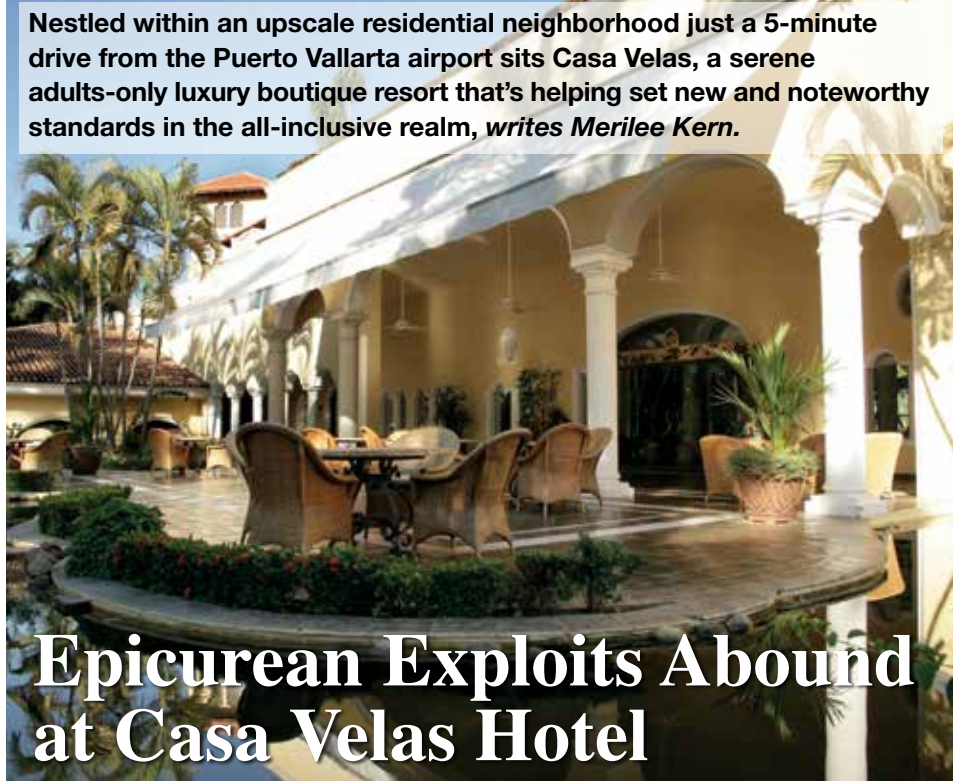


### Merilee Kern

Merilee Kern, executive editor & producer of The Luxe List International News Syndicate, is a good life connoisseur who keeps her finger on the pulse of the luxury marketplace in search of new and innovative must-haves and exemplary experiences at all price points - the affordable to the extreme.

She keeps her finger on the pulse of what's trending across all leisure and lifestyle product, service and travel categories to inform, enlighten and entertain. Also an award-winning author, APP developer, owner of a thriving communications agency, a two-time fitness champion and a proud mother of two, Merilee is the very definition of a renaissance woman.

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## Epicurean Exploits Abound at Casa Velas Hotel

As one of the many properties in the Velas Resorts portfolio, which have earned no less than 43 diamonds by AAA, I had high expectations for my own stay at the location, especially given it has garnered 8 of those diamonds in its own right.

What I had not anticipated, however, was how 'at home' I would feel while on site, which felt as much like a private estate home with an ever-attentive staff rather than a slick hotel operation with pre-programmed employees.

The layout of the grounds and the casually elegant and intimate atmosphere evokes the sense of being in a private hacienda.

Staff all regard guests by name; welcome you 'home' upon arrival (from each outing) and generally do their utmost to ensure each guest's needs and wants are duly catered for.

All 80 traditional Mexican-styled suites are top notch, with each boasting a private terrace with plunge pool or in suite Jacuzzi, goose-down comforters, free Wi-Fi, L'Occitane bath products and a fully stocked mini bar.



The exquisite 3,000-square foot, four-bedroom Presidential Suite, which sleeps 8, is replete with original artwork by Mexican artist Sergio Bustamante and also features a large dining room, living room, master suite with a spacious marble-laden bathroom, and an expansive terrace with an oversize plunge pool and jacuzzi.

The resort overlooks the lovely Marina Vallarta Golf Course where Casa Velas guests enjoy special privileges like free green fees. Other on-site amenities include a full fitness centre with life fitness cardio and Nautilus equipment, a full service spa and salon, and a pool area with plush lounge chairs, shady cabanas and a swim up palapa bar.

If surf and sand are high on your vacation agenda the hotel will provide you with a complimentary, on-demand, shuttle service to and from its private and exclusive Casa Velas Ocean Club. Guests enjoy cushioned loungers and cabanas on the beach itself; a food and beverage service, access to a pristine pool area and al fresco dining, all overlooking Mexico's Pacific Riviera beyond.



With its on-site gourmet restaurant, Emiliano, one of only two restaurants in all of Puerto Vallarta that have earned the AAA Four Diamond award, guests are treated to unlimited access to high caliber cuisine for breakfast, lunch, dinner and 24/7 in-suite service.

Beverages are equally progressive, particularly for an all-inclusive, with guests enjoying premium wines and liquor without restriction and can partake in nightly events like wine pairings; tequila, mescal and martini tastings; and other events that allow guests to get acquainted and socialise.

If you're a foodie seeking a culinary-oriented resort retreat, Casa Velas is for you.

### Gourmet Tasting Menus

In addition to its regular menu, Emiliano also extends six different five-course meals (a new one each evening) that are masterminded by head chefs from Casa Velas' sister property, the AAA Five Diamond Grand Velas Riviera Nayarit.

Menus draw from all three of their AAA Four Diamond restaurants: Frida, Piaf and Lucca. These dynamic menus rotate each evening and run for a week, starting with a French tasting menu and martini tasting hour on Sundays led by Piaf's head chef.

On Monday, Lucca's Italian-Mediterranean sampling and wine pairing takes centre stage.

Tuesdays and Thursdays are an extra special treat as 20 guests are invited to a private 'dinner with the chef'. Here, Chef Eliseo Ibarra Ramos prepares a special menu while television cooking personality, Yolanda Yanar, gives step by step explanations on the menu's preparation.

Wednesdays, Frida's head chef hosts a Mexican tasting menu and tequila tasting hour.

Fridays offer a truly elegant experience as Chef Ramos prepares a gourmet French menu while a renowned pianist provides accompaniment and live entertainment.

Saturday rounds off the week with cuisine and seafood specialties from Veracruz, Mexico.

### Authentic Street Food

While Emiliano's gourmet tasting menus have proven enormously popular, the revered restaurant also features dishes that bring to mind the tempting aromas and tantalizing visions of the street foods found in Mexico's colourful markets.

Guests can sample entrees, appetizers and desserts from six different regions including Veracruz, Puebla, Guerrero, Oaxaca, Jalisco, and the Yucatan.

Each day a different region is featured alongside Emiliano's larger menu of Mexican and international selections. What's more, servers are dressed in corresponding regional costume and are happy to answer questions about ingredients and preparation to any foodie's satisfaction.

### A Mighty Mini Bar

Casa Velas' commitment to luxury and well-being extends beyond the bounds of the resort's restaurants and bars, right into guests' rooms. Instead of the usual boring, calorie-laden mini bar fare, Casa Velas provides freshly "made on demand" crudites.



Guests can choose from the "Mexican turnip," a combination of carrots, cucumber, jicama, or an alternative selection featuring celery, beetroot and pineapple, or from three different light and healthy dressings including mango, chipotle or albahaca (basil). Crudites are available upon request and are included in the all-inclusive daily rate.

### Service Standouts

I had the pleasure of dining with Luis Angarita, Casa Velas' general manager, who spoke about what sets the resort apart from others in the region.

He stressed that, more than anything else, Casa Velas prides itself on providing top-notch service at every level of the operation.

He re-iterated the resort's focus on food as part of an all-inclusive, noting it's a major draw. "Food, creativity and presentation comparable to top restaurants in world capitals," Angarita gushed. "Name your favorite specialty cuisine - Mexican, French and Italian, it's exquisitely prepared by award winning chefs...everything, from unlimited food and wines to premium beverages, in-suite service, and even gratuities and tax are part of the all-inclusive daily rate."

With its efforts to continually innovate coupled with the quiet, private and secluded nature of this Puerto Vallarta oasis, it's no surprise U.S. dignitaries the likes of Condoleezza Rice, and two Mexican presidents have been hosted at Casa Velas. But, one need not be a dignitary to be treated like royalty here, as the staff go over and above to ensure each guest is having a personalized and pampered experience.

With its heightened level of hospitality, Casa Velas is playing an integral role in re-defining the all-inclusive category at large, and is a decidedly fine choice for the standards-driven jet setter.